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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) is to describe the types and levels of literacy skills possessed by adults living in the United States and the distribution of these skills across major subgroups of the population. To conduct the NALS, 175 trained interviewers employed by the Educational Testing Service will interview approximately 13,000 adults, aged 16-64, residing in private households and dormitories. Each interview will consist of 15 minutes of background questions and 45 minutes of simulation tasks. In the simulation tasks, adults will respond to reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks that will require them to demonstrate a range of skills and knowledge such as recognizing, acquiring, organizing, interpreting, producing, and applying information found in various types of printed materials. The study defines literacy as the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. The results of the NALS will be compared to those from other recent large-scale assessments of literacy. The survey results will be conveyed to the general public, policy and business leaders, educators, and program providers. Each of the 50 states is invited to participate in a concurrent assessment that will provide results comparable with those of the NALS. (CML)

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National Adult Literacy Survey

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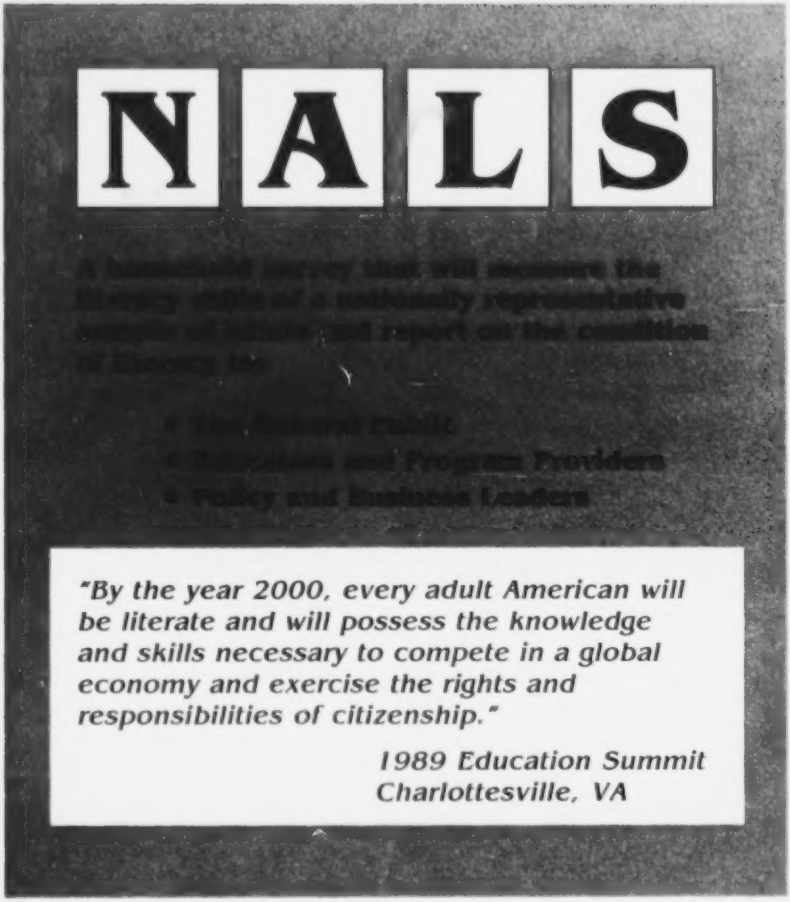
NALS
"By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship."
1989 Education Summit
Charlottesville, VA

SETTING A CONTEXT

Historically, as a nation, we have put a high premium on literacy skills as they affect both individual well-being and society at large. During the last century, literacy has taken on even greater importance as we moved from a predominantly agrarian to an industrial society. It was during this transition that our nation required that increasing numbers of individuals have a core set of skills and knowledge in order to meet changing societal needs. The introduction of compulsory schooling served to meet this requirement, and literacy became the primary tool for learning.

Thomas Jefferson defined three objectives for education:

- to prepare some citizens to be public leaders;
- to enable all citizens to exercise the rights of self-government; and,
- to prepare all citizens for the pursuit of happiness.

Education that fulfills these objectives will vary according to a country's stage of development. The types and levels of literacy skills necessary for economic participation, citizenship, and individual advancement in 1800 were different from those required in 1900 and from those skills that will be important in the year 2000. We live in a technologically advancing society, where both the number and types of written materials are growing and where increasing numbers of citizens are expected to use information from these materials in new and more complex ways.

Within this context, historians remind us that during the last 200 years, our nation's literacy skills have increased dramatically in response to these new requirements and expanded opportunities for social and economic growth. There have also been periods when demands seemed to surpass levels of attainment. Whenever these periods

occurred, we had a tendency to point to the failure of our educational system and to warn of serious social and economic consequences. Today, although we are a better educated and more literate society than at any time in our history, we find ourselves in one of these periods of imbalance. Whereas in the past we relied primarily on our formal education system to correct any imbalance that existed, we now recognize that this school-centered strategy can only be part of the solution.

Rapid technological, economic, and labor market changes demand that we pay increasing attention to the skill deficiencies of those already in the workforce. It is estimated that almost 80 percent of the projected workforce for the year 2000 is already employed. As a result, it is now widely recognized that developing new and better strategies to increase the literacy levels of both the current as well as the future workforce is essential if our nation is to maintain its standard of living and compete successfully in global markets. Increased literacy levels are equally important for participation in our technological society with its formal institutions, complex legal system, and large government programs. Our future social and economic well-being depends on our ability to meet these challenges.

At the historic education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, President Bush and the governors set out to establish a set of national education goals that would guide America into the 21st century. As adopted and reported by members of the National Governor's Association, one of the six goals states:

> ***By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.***

While few, if any, deny the important role literacy plays in our society or the advantages afforded those who have acquired and demonstrated high levels of proficiency, identifying and measuring just what particular skills individuals need to function adequately in a pluralistic society have proven to be difficult tasks. A number of national reports published since 1980 — including *A Nation at Risk, Toward a More Perfect Union, The Subtle Danger, Workforce 2000, The Bottom Line,* and *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults* — have served to intensify discussions among educators, business and labor leaders, policy makers, and the press about the literacy problems facing America and the appropriate actions that should be taken. **But, we still do not know with any precision what types and levels of literacy skills adults living in the United States possess or how these skills are distributed across major subgroups of interest. That is the primary goal of the National Adult Literacy Survey. This type of information is critical to policy makers responsible for targeting resources as well as for designing and implementing appropriate actions.**

THE NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY (NALS)

In September 1989, Educational Testing Service (ETS) was awarded a four-year contract by the National Center for Education Statistics to develop and conduct a survey of the literacy skills among adults, 16- to 64-years of age, residing in private households and dormitories across the continental United States. Approximately 13,000 adults will be assessed by some 175 trained interviewers who are experienced with interviewing techniques and testing methodology. Field testing for the

project will take place in the winter of 1991; the main assessment will occur in the winter and spring of 1992, with results reported in 1993.

Each assessment will be conducted in a face-to-face interview lasting approximately one hour and will consist of 45 minutes of simulation tasks and 15 minutes of background questions. The simulation tasks are designed to measure a broad set of literacy skills associated with authentic written and printed materials encountered at home, at work, and in communities across the United States. Adults will respond to reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks that will require them to demonstrate a range of skills and knowledge that include recognizing, acquiring, organizing, interpreting, producing, and applying information found in various types of printed materials. The background questionnaire will focus on information that will help us better understand factors associated with various levels of literacy.

A panel of 12 experts from business and industry, labor, government, research, and adult education helped devise the plan for developing and conducting the National Adult Literacy Survey — a plan that builds on our evolving knowledge and understanding about the nature of literacy in our society. These individuals serve on the Literacy Definition Committee, which has specific responsibility for working with ETS to define literacy. This definition provides a basis for setting assessment objectives as well as a blueprint for the selection and construction of simulation tasks. To further meet the needs of the survey, an additional 15-member panel has been appointed to provide technical expertise throughout the assessment process. This Technical Review Committee will hold ETS and its subcontractor (Westat) accountable for the soundness of the assessment design, the quality of the data that are collected, the integrity of the analyses conducted, and the appropriateness of the interpretations of the final results.

DEFINING LITERACY

In 1985, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), under a grant to ETS, developed and conducted a household survey of the literacy skills of young adults, ages 21 to 25. In order to consider the many points of view that exist regarding literacy, ETS convened panels of experts who helped set the framework for this assessment. Their deliberations led to the adoption of the following definition of literacy:

> ***Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.***

The study reported on the literacy skills of young adults in terms of three scales representing distinct and important aspects of literacy.

- *Prose literacy* tasks involve the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts that include editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction.
- *Document literacy* tasks involve the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in job applications or payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and indexes.
- *Quantitative literacy* tasks involve the knowledge and skills needed to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, that are embedded in printed materials, such as balancing a check book, figuring out a tip, completing an order form, or determining the amount of interest from a loan advertisement.

Extensive discussions among the **current** Literacy Definition Committee members led to the adoption of the definition and scales used in the 1985 assessment of young adults. The current Committee also recommended that new simulation tasks be developed for NALS that would serve to extend and enhance the three existing literacy scales.

REFINING AND EXTENDING THE LITERACY SCALES

Demonstrated performance on any given literacy task reflects the interaction among the structure of the material to be read, what the individual is asked to do with the material, and the nature of the content or context from which the material is drawn.

The Literacy Definition Committee decided that the new exercises would take into account:

- continued use of simulation tasks rather than traditional multiple-choice questions;
- continued emphasis on measuring a broad range of information-processing skills cutting across various contexts;
- increased emphasis on simulation tasks that require brief written and/or oral responses;
- increased emphasis on developing simulation tasks that focus on asking the respondent to describe how she or he would go about setting up and solving a problem; and
- development of some quantitative tasks that allow the respondent to use a simple, four-function calculator to solve problems.

In addition to information gathered through administration of the simulation tasks, members of the

Committee recognized the importance of collecting demographic and personal background information. Some of the issues recommended for inclusion in the background questionnaire are as follows: languages spoken at home, at work, and in the community; educational attainment and training experience; employment history and current status; use of literacy skills for work and leisure; availability of and access to education and training; types of learning occurring through work and community activities; and participation in civic and political affairs.

LINKING NALS TO OTHER LITERACY ASSESSMENTS

One of the major goals of NALS is to compare the results of this survey to those from other large-scale assessments of literacy that have been undertaken during the past few years. These include the literacy assessment of young adults conducted in 1985 by ETS for NAEP and the Workplace Literacy Assessment currently being conducted by ETS for the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). This DOL study focuses on the literacy proficiencies of eligible applicants for services under the Job Training and Partnership Act (JTPA), Employment Service (ES), and Unemployment Insurance (UI) programs.

In order to allow comparisons to be made, a significant number of simulation tasks used in the NAEP and DOL assessments will be included in NALS. The use of a common set of exercises in the three assessments will allow us to compare demonstrated literacy proficiencies on the three scales among the various populations surveyed. For example, comparisons can be made between the literacy skills demonstrated in the 1985 survey and those of the current cohort of 21- to 25-year olds. In addition, we can begin to explore how literacy skills develop and change over

time by examining results for 28- to 33-year-old NALS participants who were in the age range of 21 to 25 years in 1985. Moreover, we can look at how adults who are eligible to receive services from JTPA, ES, and UI programs compare to selected subgroups participating in NALS.

REPORTING THE RESULTS

Results from the National Adult Literacy Survey will provide policy makers, business and labor leaders, educators, researchers, and citizens with vital information on the condition of literacy in America that is not currently available from the frequently administered school-based surveys. Information resulting from this survey will:

- describe the types and levels of literacy demonstrated by the total adult population, adults within specified age ranges, and adults comprising "at risk" subgroups;
- characterize and help explain demonstrated literacy skills in terms of demographic and personal background characteristics;
- for the first time, profile the Prose, Document, and Quantitative literacy skills of the American workforce;
- relate literacy skills to current labor-market indices as well as occupational categories; and
- compare assessment results from this survey with those from the 1985 literacy assessment of young adults conducted by NAEP and with those from the Workplace Literacy Assessment being conducted for the U.S. Department of Labor.

One of the goals of this survey is to develop a valuable *information system* that can be used to generate several reports tailored to the information needs of various

audiences. These audiences include the general public, policy and business leaders, educators, and program providers, as well as researchers who will want to exploit the richness of the data base to conduct secondary analyses. In generating this information system, we also hope to be able to inspire thoughtful commentary among columnists, policy makers, business leaders, and educators that will begin to translate the survey results into action.

STATE OPTION

The goal of any assessment is to conduct a study that provides reliable and valid information on a representative sample of some population — in this case, adults 16- to 64-years of age.

Accomplishing this goal means that, while we will be able to report on the literacy skills of the nation, not every state will be part of the national sample and adults sampled within a particular state will not necessarily be representative of the state itself.

To provide states with an opportunity to understand better the literacy skills of their populations, each of the 50 states is invited to participate in a concurrent assessment that will provide results comparable with those of the national study. A letter of invitation that describes the nature of the study, the costs associated with each program option, and a timeline (including a deadline for state participation) has been sent to state directors of adult education, state JTPA directors, state literacy initiative directors, and governors.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information concerning NALS, or the state option, or would like to have your name placed on a mailing list, please contact one of the following:

Irwin S. Kirsch,
Project Director

Douglas W. Rhodes,
Field Director

Educational Testing Service
Rosedale Road
Mail Stop 05-P
Princeton, NJ 08541

(800) 223-0267

Andrew Kolstad,
Project Monitor

National Center for
Education Statistics
555 New Jersey Avenue
Washington, DC 20208

(202) 357-6773

National Adult Literacy Survey
Educational Testing Service
Rosedale Road
Mail Stop 02-P
Princeton, NJ 08541

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